

# Does the context matter for political gender stereotypes as a source of voter bias? An experimental study in Flanders (Belgium) and Slovakia.<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

This paper focuses on the prevalence of political gender stereotypes in Flanders (Belgium) and Slovakia. These settings present an interesting case for comparison. Flanders can be described as a gender-neutral, or even women-friendly, political context, whereas the Slovak society is rather male-dominated and conservative. The exact same experimental research design was applied in both Flanders and Slovakia. Based on samples of similar sizes in both countries, we analyze the presence of stereotyped patterns in voters' perceptions of political candidates with a special focus on perceived (issue) competence, perceived ideological positioning, and perceived leadership abilities.

Our results indicate that, on a general level, political gender stereotypes are rather absent among our sample, except for issue competence stereotypes. However, the latter only seem to work in one direction, i.e. in favor of male candidates in male-dominated policy areas. Similarly, throughout our analyses, we did not find any evidence to support embeddedness of political gender stereotypes in different cultural and political contexts of Flanders and Slovakia. Most importantly, the finding that voters' perceptions of candidates is primarily based on the extent to which voters agree with the content of the presented policy position, demonstrates that other cues can outweigh the importance of candidate gender.

**Keywords:** gender, political representation, political psychology, comparative experimental design

## 1. Introduction

Women continue to be underrepresented in parliaments across the globe. Moreover, this underrepresentation is unequal across countries and regions. An extensive literature has pointed to the importance of cultural, economic and institutional explanations, making important contributions to our understanding of factors that are beneficial to or impede women's representation.

The attention of this paper is directed towards the role of voters in this phenomenon. Voters lack resources, time or interest to become informed about all candidates in elections. Therefore, they rely on voting cues (McDermott, 1997), such as a candidate's gender. On the basis of this

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gender, voters ascribe particular personality traits, capacities and opinions to candidates, which are referred to as political gender stereotypes (Huddy & Terkildsen, 1993b).

The prevalence of political gender stereotypes has been extensively documented in the United States or in developed countries in Western Europe and Scandinavia (e.g. Alexander & Andersen, 1993; Dolan, 2010, 2014; Fox & Smith, 1998; Huddy & Terkildsen, 1993b; Koch, 2000; Matland, 1994; Rosenwasser, Rogers, Fling, Silvers-Pickens, & Butemeyer, 1987; Sapiro, 1981). In these studies, hypothetical candidates were presented to respondents, who were then asked to evaluate these candidates. Generally, women were considered as less competent and more leftist than men.

However, we cannot simply extrapolate the results of previous studies to other regions, since gender stereotypes are found to be conditional upon the political context (Matland, 1994; M. M. Taylor-Robinson, A. Yarkoney-Sorek, & N. Geva, 2016). Citizens' views on women in politics may be subject to change as they might become more familiar with female politicians entering parliament and government over time. Consequently, with exposure over several years, citizens might start to view women as equals to men in politics (M. M. Taylor-Robinson et al., 2016). This illustrates the necessity to conduct studies on the prevalence of political gender stereotypes in different contexts and settings.

In this paper we present a comparative study of political gender stereotypes in Flanders, the largest region of Belgium, and Slovakia. Unlike countries of Western Europe, post-communist countries have so far been omitted in the literature on gender stereotypes, although they present an intriguing case for comparison. This paper has two main objectives. First, we test several hypotheses concerning stereotyping processes of voters on the basis of the gender of political candidates. Second, we examine whether these political gender stereotypes are conditioned upon political and cultural context. Flanders and Slovakia present an interesting case for comparison. Both countries share proportional electoral systems, however they considerably differ as regards the share of elected women, as well as regards women in top political positions. In addition, the post-communist context adds a special puzzle as on one hand, women were portrayed as equal to men and encouraged to participate on all issues in the society during state-socialist regime, while on the other hand they were forced out of workforce and into traditional women roles (e.g. Havelková, 2017).

Based on an experimental survey, conducted among samples of similar sizes in both countries, we analyse the presence of stereotypes patterns in voters' perceptions of political candidates with a special focus on perceived (issue) competence, perceived ideological positioning and perceived leadership abilities. In doing so, this paper provides more insights on the role of political, societal and cultural contextual factors on the development, and impact, of gendered attitudes among voters.

The paper proceeds as follows. In section 2 we set the context for subsequent discussions: first, by conceptualizing women's political underrepresentation in connection with the role of political gender stereotypes, and, second, by elaborating on similarities and differences between Flanders and Slovakia and the position of women in their respective political systems. Based on these discussions we present four groups of hypotheses related to gendered policy issue areas, voters' perception of the ideological leaning of candidates, the candidate's ability to function in leadership positions, and the general competence of candidates, and two alternative hypotheses related to the impact of the political culture. In section 3 we thoroughly explain our methodological approach, hence the online experimental survey used for the research, and elaborate on the data collection process. In section 4 we discuss our data, the variables used in the analysis and present the main results of linear regression analyses which are discussed in relation to our research questions and hypotheses. Finally, section 5 concludes by arguing that other factors can outweigh the cue of candidate gender and that political gender stereotypes might require activation before voters use them to evaluate candidates.

## **2. Theoretical framework**

### **2.1. (Political) gender stereotypes**

Although women are becoming more successful in parliamentary elections and government appointments in recent years, the representation of women is still below parity: worldwide only 23% of Members of Parliament (MPs) are female; in European countries this percentage amounts to 26% (IPU, 2017). Indeed, the starting point of many studies on gender and politics has been that men are overrepresented in politics, whereas women only constitute a small minority of elected officials (Ballington, 2005; Sapiro, 1981; Shvedova, 2005). This underrepresentation of women is potentially dangerous, because some interests are likely to be neglected, implying that there is a bias in the content of the political debate (Jones, 1997; Schwindt-Bayer, 2011; Schwindt-Bayer, 2006).

Several explanations, both on the side of party selectors and voters, have been provided for this political underrepresentation of women. Previous research exploring the mechanisms behind voter biases points out that gender stereotyping processes explain, at least, a part of the puzzle (e.g. Bauer, 2017; Dolan, 2014; Lawless, 2004). Gender stereotypes are inherently present in our society. There are remarkably uniform differences in the personality traits ascribed to men and women. A typical woman is stereotyped as warm, gentle, kind, passive, loyal, soft-spoken, tender, communal, concerned with the wellbeing and welfare of others, compassionate and moral (Alexander & Andersen, 1993; Deaux & Lewis, 1984; Huddy & Capelos, 2002; Prentice & Carranza, 2002b), whereas a typical man is viewed as tough, aggressive, assertive, ambitious, analytical, competitive, controlling, decisive, independent, individualistic, emotionally stable, rational and a stronger leader (Alexander & Andersen, 1993; Deaux & Lewis, 1984; Huddy & Capelos, 2002; Prentice & Carranza, 2002a). Eagly (1987) summarized these findings in terms of two dimensions, the communal and the agentic. Women are believed to have more attributes of the communal dimension, which describes a concern with the welfare of other people, and men are supposed to have more attributes of the agentic dimension, which refers to an assertive and controlling tendency.

These invisible, yet persistent stereotypes about men and women also affect the political scenery (Celis & Meier, 2006). Voters lack resources, time or interest to become informed about all election candidates. Therefore, they rely on voting cues (McDermott, 2009), such as the gender of these candidates, and unconsciously associate this gender with particular personality traits, capacities and opinions (Huddy & Terkildsen, 1993b), which are referred to as political gender stereotypes (Brown, 1994; Dolan, 2014; Fox & Smith, 1998). As Huddy and Terkildsen (1993b) demonstrated, voters have expectations of the traits that women and men possess and apply these expectations to their impressions of female and male candidates.

In their seminal work, Huddy and Terkildsen (1993b) developed two varieties of political gender stereotypes, those based on women's traits and those based on their beliefs. The former, referred to as the trait approach, states that voters' assumptions about a candidate's gender-linked personality traits drive expectations that women and men have different areas of issue competence. Since men are seen as competitive and assertive and women as communal and social, voters expect male politicians to excel in competitive issues in which the primary aim is to defeat competitors, while female politicians are expected to be better at communal issues, in which the focus is on the welfare of other people (Alexander & Andersen, 1993; Brown, 1994;

Kahn, 1996; Matland, 1994). In essence, this is about the expectation that male and female politicians have other areas of issue competence and specialization. We will therefore refer to this reasoning as *issue competence stereotyp(ing)/(es)*.

Gender stereotypes of politicians also include a political component. Huddy and Terkildsen (1993b) named this the belief approach. This approach stresses a more political aspect: male and female politicians are stereotyped as holding different political views. Research demonstrated that the sexes differ in their social and political attitudes (Diekman, Eagly, & Kulesa, 2002). Koch (1999) and Huddy and Terkildsen (1993b) argued that female candidates are generally perceived as more liberal than male candidates of the same party. We will refer to this as *ideological position stereotyp(ing)/(es)*.

Research exploring gender stereotypes has been primarily conducted in the United States (US) or in developed countries in Western Europe and Scandinavia. Although gender stereotypes are not homogeneous packages and might differ across segments of the population<sup>3</sup> and over time, these studies point to certain stereotypical patterns. The existence of political gender stereotypes has been first and foremost documented in the US (Alexander & Andersen, 1993; Dolan, 2014; Huddy & Terkildsen, 1993a; Koch, 2002; Lawless, 2004; Rosenwasser et al., 1987; Sapiro, 1981). In this context, female candidates are more likely to be perceived as competent in communal issues linked to the traditional domain of the family, such as education, health care and helping the poor, whereas men would do a better job with agentic issues, such as military spending, foreign trade, agriculture and taxes. Some studies also found considerable evidence for the existence of gender-belief stereotypes.

Some other experimental studies evaluating women candidates have been conducted outside the US. Matland (1994) found a substantial projection of gender stereotypes onto candidates with differences in perceived policy competencies in Norway, despite its reputation for a progressive political culture. Herrick and Sapieva (1998) demonstrated that male candidates are perceived as more competent on a number of policy areas in Kazakhstan. Recently, Taylor-Robinson and colleagues (2016) have found that candidate gender affects the perception of candidate abilities in Costa Rica, but in favour of women. In Israel, on the other hand, a significant gender stereotyping effect, in which female candidates are evaluated lower than

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<sup>3</sup> The importance of gender stereotypes might, for example, vary across age groups, sex, level of political interest, etc.

male candidates, has been revealed. This may come as no surprise, since Costa Rica can be described as a ‘best case scenario’ for society displaying gender neutral attitudes, due to its extensive experience with women in government. Israel, in contrast has had limited experience with women holding many seats in the Knesset or cabinet (Michelle M Taylor-Robinson et al., 2016).

These results highlight the importance of the political context: the important issues of the day and the history of women in government affect whether participants favourably evaluate female candidates. Hence, the prevalence of political gender stereotypes should be considered alongside contextual variables to gain a fuller understanding of how voters evaluate and choose women candidates. The political contexts consists, on the one hand, of the dominant norms and values in a country (i.e. political culture) and, on the other hand, of the positions occupied by women in society. Cultural values and attitudes towards women differ among societies (Inglehart, Norris, & Welzel, 2002) and there could be differences in how voters perceive female candidates between societies with a long history of women in key political positions and those where this is not the case. Consequently, it is necessary to extend the research on political gender stereotypes to other contexts.

Countries of post-communist Europe add a special challenge to existing literature since they have so far been underexplored (Herrick & Sapieva, 1998) and they represent a particularly interesting case for comparison. On one hand, during state-socialist regimes in East and Central Europe women were portrayed as equal to men, being able and encouraged to be valuable part of the workforce. On the other hand, as Havelková (2017) shows, family policies incentivized women to stay out of work and to assume more traditional women roles at the same time. These legacies may consequently contribute to perception of women’s competence to participate in politics, or to cover specific issue areas.

In addition, this particular position of women during state-socialist regimes may manifest itself along Kahn’s (1994) argument, which holds that gender stereotyping is not only limited to the issue of political domain – connecting gender to particular policy issues or fields of expertise, but also relates to the issue of electability. In other words, women’s potential to be elected may be conditioned upon levels of government: while they may be perceived as suitable candidates for lower positions, voters might be less eager to elect them to the top offices. This suggests a presence of a gradually intensifying mechanism of discouragement which is getting stronger

when moving up the higher levels of political hierarchy. It could be perceived as a political variation of the glass ceiling, a term which is traditionally used in the context of issues such as gender pay gap (e.g. Arulampalam, Booth, & Bryan, 2007; Morgan, 1998). In the context of post-communist countries of Central and Eastern Europe, this could be observed in the fairly rare occurrences of female presidents, prime ministers, ministers or party leaders.

## **2.2. Comparing Flanders and Slovakia: advantages and disadvantages**

The purpose of this paper is twofold. First, just as in other studies on political gender stereotypes, we seek to identify whether and how political gender stereotypes define voters' perception of political candidates in Flanders and Slovakia. And second, by conducting a comparative study, we examine the conditionality of gender stereotypes upon the political context. The selected contexts do not present a usual case for comparison, and do not resemble a typical comparative case-study neither a most-similar nor most-different system design. On one hand, in both polities women are underrepresented in politics, and previous research pointed to existing stereotyping patterns, although not very strong, especially as regards issue competence stereotypes (Devroe & Wauters, 2018; Uhlík, Spáč, & Malová, 2017). On the other hand, there are considerably different experiences between the polities in question with women in politics, as well as regarding the general political culture, or the role of women in societies (e.g. Havelková, 2017).

When looking at the role of women in politics, the share of women elected to the parliament is significantly higher in Flanders than in Slovakia. While 38% of MPs in the Belgian Chamber of Representatives are women, which ranks Belgium among the countries with one of the highest shares of women in the legislature (IPU 2017), in the Slovak National Council women take up only as little as 20% of all MPs. The same goes for women in top political positions: in Flanders women serve as party leaders, and have been, or are, in charge of prominent ministries such as the Ministry of Finance, Justice, and Home Affairs. In Slovakia, since the breakdown of state-socialist regime – but even before that – elections managed to produce only one government led by a woman. A similar situation can be observed at the level of ministries, although there have been some influential women in charge of specific issue areas – such as Justice or Social Affairs. Women in Slovakia have never held the leadership position in parliament, nor there has been any woman leading one of the strongest political parties. The only exception can be found in the judicial branch where 62% of all judges are women, and

women are currently holding three highest positions in the judiciary (Uhlík & Spáč, 2017). However, women's overrepresentation in the judiciary is not that unique: in Belgium women compose 53% of all judges, but their share declines moving up the judicial hierarchy (CEPEJ, 2016).

In addition, both countries have a proportional electoral system, which regularly produces higher shares of women than majoritarian systems (Caul 1999; Matland 1998, 2005; Norris 1985, 2004; Rule 1987; Sabonmatsu 2006). Systems with proportional representation also create a political context that focuses less on individuals, and place more emphasis on political parties and their leadership. Furthermore, in Belgium the representation of women may be reinforced by the existence of gender quotas, which are not present in the Slovak system.

Also, women are fairly equally spread over different parties in Flanders – ranging from 33% (for the extreme right Vlaams Belang) to 55% (for the Christian-Democratic CD&V and the social democratic sp.a). This however is not the case of Slovakia, During the last election period, the main political parties put forward lists with only 14 to 26 percent women, while only a small fraction of them were put on top of them. In contrast to Flanders, the proclaimed left-right orientation of parties did not seem to play a role. To illustrate, while the average number of women on the party list was roughly 20%, the highest share of women was present at the list of the conservative party SME Rodina (26%), while the proclaimed right wing liberal party SaS only put about 17 percent of women on the list, and the social democratic SMER-SD about 18 percent. This is especially important in terms of ideological position stereotypes. It is often claimed that female politicians are perceived as more leftist because of the alignment or interconnectedness of partisan and gender stereotypes (Bauer, 2017; Winter, 2010). Especially, in the US, women politicians are predominantly found in the Democratic Party, which is more leftist (in European terms) than the Republican. The perceived ideological position is supposed to be transferred from the party to the candidate by the voters, which constitutes an additional rationale for why women are perceived as being more leftist. Although the ideological left-right dichotomy makes less sense in the Slovak context, as is also suggested in previous research which argues that other than socioeconomic competition is often crucial for decision making process of voters (e.g. Krause, 2000), we can expect that ideological position stereotypes will be less outspoken in Flanders, since female politicians are more equally spread across different parties covering the entire ideological spectrum.



All in all, the main difference between the two studied polities lies in the extent to which voters have been exposed to female politicians suggesting voters in Flanders should be less prone to hold gender-biased perceptions of political candidates. To put it differently, and following exposure theory (Jennings, 2006): Flemish voters are more acquainted with female politicians and women in top offices, it can therefore be expected that they would be more open to treat candidates fairly regardless of their gender. On the other hand, the observed difference in representation may be to some extent caused by the existence of gender quotas in Belgium, which are absent in Slovakia suggesting that if there are no differences between Flemish and Slovak voters, the representation of women is more dependent on the rules of political battle than on voters' perceptions and biases.

Finally, a common ground for comparison of Flanders and Slovakia can be also found in theories of 'small states'. Both polities are of a relatively small size from the perspective of their population – 6.5 million and 5.5 million respectively, which provides an interesting similarity in otherwise different contexts. It is argued, that there are particular demands on the officials, representatives and public administrators in small countries, mainly as a consequence of the limited availability of resources, human capital, as well as a existence of a special social ecology which is highly personalised and with strong interpersonal and informal connections (Sarapu, 2010). To deal with these issues of this social context the administrations and their representatives need to deal with issues, such as small numbers of skilled actors, limited possibilities for specialization and close interpersonal relationships (Farrugia, 1993). A potential candidate for public office therefore has to convince the electorate about his or her ability and qualification to deal with these particular issues, perception of which might be hindered by the presence of implicit gender stereotypes (Kahn, 1994).

An analysis of the prevalence of political gender stereotypes in Flanders and Slovakia is hence interesting from both the perspectives of their differences and similarities. While Flanders' context can be described as gender-neutral or even women friendly, the context of Slovakia, is fairly conservative and male-dominated in many areas of public and private life. Flemish society has a high share of female representatives and the voters have been exposed for several decades to female leaders, while Slovakia struggles with getting a substantive share of women into parliament, not to mention the lack of their presence in top party, legislative or executive offices.

### **2.3. Research questions and hypotheses**

This paper focuses on two main research questions. The first one is related to the prevalence of political gender stereotypes in both Flanders and Slovakia:

**RQ1: To what extent are political gender stereotyping processes prevalent in Flanders and Slovakia?**

We aim to test different hypotheses, derived from the literature presented above on political gender stereotypes in electoral behaviour, on our sample of Flemish and Slovak university students. Our hypotheses can be divided into four groups placing emphasis on issue competence stereotypes (1), ideological position stereotypes (2), leadership ability stereotypes (3) and general competence stereotypes (4). Our hypotheses are hence as follows:

- Issue competence stereotypes:
  - H1a: Men will be perceived as more competent for agentic policy issues.
  - H1b: Women will be perceived as more competent for communal policy issues.
  - H1c: Men and women will be perceived as similarly competent for gender-neutral issues.
- Ideological position stereotypes:
  - H2: Women will be perceived as more leftist as compared to men.
- Leadership ability stereotypes:
  - H3: Men will be perceived as more competent for leadership positions.
- General competence stereotypes:
  - H4: Men will be perceived as more competent than women to function in political positions.

Second, our comparative design and the fact that we used identical questionnaires in very different contexts allows us to explore whether the role of gender stereotypes is conditioned upon different political and cultural contexts.

**RQ2: To what extent is the prevalence of political gender stereotypes conditioned by the political context and culture?**

In this regard, our study of different contexts suggests that due to their higher exposure to women politicians, and due to the more women-friendly environment, Flemish respondents should be less likely to showcase gender stereotyping processes than Slovak respondents. Alternatively, differences in women's representation may be induced by the existence of gender quotas in Belgium rather than voters' perceptions of candidates. This suggests that there may not necessarily be significant differences between Flemish and Slovak respondents. This is summarized in the following alternative hypotheses:

- H5a: Political gender stereotypes will be less prevalent among Flemish university students than among Slovak university students.
- H5b: Political gender stereotypes will be equally prevalent among Flemish university students than among Slovak university students.

### **3. Methodology**

We set up a quasi-experimental research design in which hypothetical candidates were presented to respondents in text messages in which only their sex, some biographical information and their policy positions on a number of issues were mentioned. We did not mention the party affiliation of the presented candidates and the policy statements all took a centrist position, in order not to influence the assessment of the ideological position of the presented candidates.

Our study used a between subjects design. The candidate's sex (male, female and a control group in which we did not mention the gender of the presented candidate) was manipulated as between-group factor. Respondents were randomly assigned to one of the different treatments. The hypothetical candidates were presented as 'candidate X'. In Dutch and Slovakian, it is possible to indicate the different sex of these candidates ('kandidaat'/'kandidát' for the male candidate and 'kandidate'/'kandidátka' for the female candidate). For the control group, a reference was made to 'person X' or 'candidate X'. In all other respects, speeches and questionnaires were identical, in order not to provide any cues to the salience of gender.

The presented stimuli included several elements: a text message (biographical statement about the candidate and his/her policy views on four issues) and a facial silhouette. The inclusion of facial silhouettes is innovative and is a subtle cue to respondents about the sex of the candidate. Previous studies mostly indicated the sex of the presented candidate by presenting him/her with a clear male/female name (e.g. Dolan, 2014; Huddy & Terkildsen, 1993a; Matland, 1994;

Rosenwasser et al., 1987), or by including images (see for example Aalberg & Jenssen, 2007; Lammers, Gordijn, & Otten, 2009). However, physical appearance also impacts on the perception of the presented candidates (Lammers et al., 2009). Furthermore, also names can evoke certain prejudices because they possibly remind respondents of someone with the same name or because they simply (dis)like the name.

The text messages were made as centrist as possible and were made sufficiently vague to make sense both in Flemish and Slovak context. They were based on recurring themes and proposed solutions found in the party programs of the four Flemish centre parties (CD&V, Open VLD, N-VA and sp.a) and the major parties in last Slovak parliamentary elections (SMER, SNS, SaS, OĽANO). Text messages presented candidate's viewpoints on four policy issues: defence, as a predominantly agentic policy issue; education and justice, as gender-neutral issue areas; and childcare, as a communal issue area typically associated with women. The biographical statement included some basic information about the candidate (e.g. about his/her educational and professional background, hobbies and familial status). An example of the presented profiles and a translation of the text message can be found in the appendix.

The most important advantage of an experimental approach is the possibility to control for a number of intervening factors. Several measures were taken to ensure that only our key variable (i.e. the sex of the candidate) plays a role in the evaluation made by the respondents. First, the institutional context was held constant by focusing on Flanders and Slovakia. Second, the characteristics of respondents were controlled by randomly assigning them to one of the different treatments and by making comparisons between experimental groups. Third, by using hypothetical candidates without partisan affiliation, we did not intervene in actual discussion nor was there any effect of pre-existing preferences or personal (dis)tastes. Taken together, all these measures offer a methodologically rigid test.

The experiment was conducted in April-May 2018. We relied on a sample of university students enrolled at the faculty of Law at Ghent University and Faculty of Arts and Faculty of Law at Comenius University in Bratislava. We opted for a student sample as budget constraints did not allow for a representative sample selection and students were easily approachable before or after lectures. Using a student sample often leads to scepticism about the generalization of the results (Schneider & Bos, 2011). We, however, argue that a student sample is a relevant case to test the aforementioned hypotheses. For the purpose of this research, the student sample accts

as a least-likely case (Flyvbjerg, 2006). First, students are more likely to have been exposed to women in (prominent) positions in government and parliament. They therefore might be more liberal in their attitudes towards female candidates (Kahn, 1994). Second, a higher level of education is correlated with higher levels of political sophistication (Hillygus, 2005). This, in turn, reduces the liability that respondents will use cognitive shortcuts to appraise a candidate since students dispose of more nuanced information on which to base their evaluation (Coronel & Federmeier, 2016; Marien, Hooghe, & Dassonneville, 2013). Hence, students are voters with a lower probability of holding political gender stereotypes. Being a critical case, our student sample permits a more stringent test of the hypotheses and therefore allows careful deductions to the general population (Flyvbjerg, 2006). We can expect that if this study demonstrates the presence of political gender stereotypes, their prevalence will be more substantial among the broader population.

## **4. Analysis**

### **4.1. Data and variables**

We collected altogether 168 responses, 98 in Flanders and 70 in Slovakia. From the original sample we excluded two groups of respondents. First, we excluded “speeder respondents” who spent less than half of the median time needed to complete the survey. Hence, they may have given rather random answers.<sup>4</sup> This step excluded 9 Flemish respondents. Second, in the survey we included a question asking respondents to identify the gender of the candidate that was presented to them. Subsequently, respondents who had to evaluate a male or female candidate and marked the opposite gender were excluded from the sample. We also included other manipulation checks focusing on the candidate’s biographical information and the policy text messages, in order not to over-accentuate the importance of the candidate’s sex. Our final sample consists of 156 respondents, 87 from Flanders and 69 from Slovakia. Of Flemish respondents 56 were women, and 31 men, while their distribution between the groups was fairly reasonable as 30 respondents were presented a male candidate, 31 a female candidate, and 26 belonged to the control group. In Slovakia, 33 out of 69 respondents were men, the remaining 36 were women. Of the respondents, 30 were randomly assigned to a male candidate, 26 were presented a female candidate, and only 13 were assigned to the control group.

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<sup>4</sup> The median completion time was 584 seconds, hence we excluded all the respondents who spent less than 292 seconds filling out the survey. We opted for median instead of average completion time because there were several cases where the duration was reported even above 10,000 seconds suggesting some respondents did not submit their answers immediately after the completion of the survey.

To test our hypotheses, we used several dependent variables. Their summary is presented in Table 1. First, to examine issue competence stereotypes we included questions to grasp the respondents' perception of the candidate's competence on a variety of issues. Respondents were asked to mark on a 7-point scale, ranging from very incompetent to very competent, their perception of the presented candidate's capability to lead ministries covering the following eight issues: family issues, education, defence and external security, justice, international relations, finance, health care, and environment. The policy position of the hypothetical candidates considering the first four listed topics was included in the treatments. The remaining four issues were not covered in the questionnaire. It is often found that men are considered as more competent in agentic policy areas, while women are perceived as more competent in communal domains, however most commonly it applies only to policy areas not included in the experimental treatment (see for example Matland, 1994). Regarding the non-covered issues, we included one typically agentic issue – international relations, one communal – health care, and two gender-neutral policy areas – finance and environment.

As for the second hypothesis, related to the ideological positioning of candidates, we asked respondents to place the presented candidate's opinions on a 7-point scale, ranging from very leftist to very rightist. To prevent misunderstandings (e.g. Castles & Mair, 1984) we provided respondents a definition stating that political left is usually associated with the solidarity

	<b>All</b>	<b>Male</b>	<b>Female</b>	<b>Control</b>
<b>Family issues</b>	5.06 (1.28)	5.00 (1.21)	5.04 (1.49)	5.21 (1.08)
<b>Education</b>	5.02 (1.20)	5.02 (1.10)	5.16 (1.08)	4.82 (1.48)
<b>Defence</b>	4.24 (1.38)	4.28 (1.37)	4.05 (1.34)	4.46 (1.47)
<b>Justice</b>	5.46 (1.03)	5.45 (1.02)	5.46 (1.04)	5.49 (1.07)
<b>International relations (IR)</b>	4.39 (1.31)	4.30 (1.11)	4.29 (1.50)	4.77 (1.27)
<b>Finance</b>	4.15 (1.37)	4.18 (1.36)	4.18 (1.36)	4.05 (1.43)
<b>Health care</b>	3.59 (1.45)	3.38 (1.39)	3.61 (1.36)	3.85 (1.63)
<b>Environment</b>	3.44 (1.25)	3.27 (1.21)	3.56 (1.21)	3.51 (1.35)
<b>Candidate on left-right scale</b>	3.65 (1.27)	3.83 (1.30)	3.42 (1.34)	3.69 (1.08)
<b>Leadership</b>	-0.97 (1.21)	-0.93 (1.16)	-1.02 (1.27)	-0.97 (1.22)
<b>Competence to serve as PM</b>	4.48 (1.25)	4.38 (1.14)	4.47 (1.39)	4.64 (1.20)
<b>Competence in politics (general)</b>	5.61 (0.86)	5.60 (0.81)	5.61 (0.94)	5.62 (0.85)
<b>Competence (average)</b>	5.18 (0.82)	5.10 (0.78)	5.19 (0.92)	5.29 (0.71)

**Table 1. Summary table for all used dependent variables with presented mean values and standard deviations (in parentheses).**

principle and that emphasis is put on caring for those worse-off or members of minorities; while political right is associated with ideas of freedom and primary responsibility for one's self.

To test the third hypothesis we used two dependent variables. One of them was simply respondents' answers on a question related to the candidate's ability to serve in the position of the prime minister, hence a clear leadership position (on a 7-point scale ranging from very incompetent to very competent). The second was calculated as the difference between the assessment of the candidate's competence to serve as a prime minister, and his/her competence to be a member of the parliament. The logic behind it is straightforward; we assumed that the perception of the presented candidate's leadership ability would manifest itself in a different assessment of the candidate's competence to perform in the top position as compared to perform in a high, yet still rather ordinary, position in the parliament.

For the fourth hypothesis we also used two separate dependent variables. The first one was based on a survey question asking respondents to evaluate the candidate's competence to function in politics in general (on a 7-point scale ranging from very incompetent to very competent). The second was calculated as an average score assigned to the candidate on three different questions: competence to function in politics, in parliament, and as a prime minister. Finally, as can be seen in Table 1, simple t-tests would not uncover any statistically significant differences between groups, mainly due to considerably large standard deviations of all observed variables in all groups. Therefore, we opted for linear models with multiple independent variables to understand the mechanism(s) behind respondents' perception of the presented candidate in more depth, which will be presented in the following section.

Our main independent variables were gender of the presented candidate, as the experimental treatment and focal point of this research, and country where the respondent filled out the survey. To obtain a more complex understanding, we included several control variables in the modelling that were used depending on the tested model. Their summary can be found in Table 2. For models in which the candidate's perceived competence in policy domains covered by the text messages served as dependent variables, we used respondents' level of agreement with the individual text messages. After completing the main part of the questionnaire, we again presented respondents the text messages on the four policy areas, this time asking them to express their level of agreement with each of them (on a 7-point scale ranging from complete disagreement to complete agreement).

	All	Flanders	Slovakia
Agreement on defence	5.04 (1.31)	4.99 (1.33)	5.12 (1.29)
Agreement on education	5.69 (1.00)	5.44 (1.00)	6.00 (0.92)
Agreement on justice	5.96 (0.94)	5.78 (0.98)	6.17 (0.84)
Agreement on childcare	5.35 (1.21)	5.14 (1.33)	5.61 (0.97)
Average agreement	5.51 (0.74)	5.34 (0.75)	5.72 (0.67)
Respondent on left-right scale	4.36 (1.26)	4.20 (1.34)	4.57 (1.14)
L-R difference	1.39 (1.08)	1.41 (1.11)	1.36 (1.04)
Women status	4.80 (2.89)	3.84 (2.59)	6.02 (2.82)
Equality	10.89 (1.69)	10.96 (1.76)	10.79 (1.04)

**Table 2. Summary table for control variables with presented mean values and standard deviations (in parentheses).**

Based on these answers we calculated an average agreement with the candidate which was in turn used as an independent variable in the models explaining the perceived competence of the candidate on policy issues not covered by the text messages, and models addressing perceptions of the candidates' leadership abilities, and general competence. As can be seen in Table 2, the levels of agreement were generally rather high, never falling on average under 5 on a 7-point scale. Also, we can see that the order of policy domains from most to least agreement is the same in both countries as respondents tended to agree most with statement on justice, and the least with the statement on defence and external security. And even though Slovak respondents generally agreed more with the presented text messages, the presented means show that policy statements were not too controversial, and not differently received in the two studied countries, which supports their use in comparative experimental designs.

In addition, we used two separate variables based on respondent's self-positioning on the left-right scale. The first was a simple answer on a 7-point scale ranging from perceiving one's self as very leftist to very rightist. This variable was only used for one model addressing the perceived candidate's positioning on the left-right scale in order to control for different understandings of the left-right between respondents. The second was an absolute value of the calculated difference between respondent's self-positioning and his/her perceived position of the presented candidate. This was constructed based on the assumption that the larger the perceived difference of the respondent's and the candidate's ideological position, the less likely should the respondent be to consider the presented candidate as competent.

Finally, we calculated two variables based on respondents' positions towards six value statements (on a 7-point scale ranging from complete disagreement to complete agreement). The statements were as follows: a) men should be considered as legal representatives of their



families; b) women should concentrate on raising their children and household instead of a career; c) women should focus less on their rights and more on their responsibilities as mothers and wives; d) men and women should be equally responsible for politics; e) men and women should be equally responsible for household chores, such as washing and cleaning; f) men and women should be treated equally in professional matters. On the basis of an exploratory factor analysis with 0.5 cut-off these variables were divided in two groups. The ‘Women status’ variable pools together the first three of the questions focusing on women’s position in the society, their role in family, workforce, and importance of women rights – all three variables share that the higher the value respondents assigned to the question, the more conservative they were. The second new variable labelled ‘Equality’ covers the three latter statements and virtually measures respondents’ stance towards gender equality, where higher values suggest more liberal respondents. New variables were calculated using weighted sum scores (e.g. DiStefano, Zhu, & Mindrila, 2009) as a simple aggregation of respondents’ answers weighted by factor loadings.<sup>5</sup> Table 2 shows that there were differences between Flemish and Slovak respondents. Consistently with our expectations, Slovaks appear to be more conservative, particularly in questions related to the status of women, although standard deviations are quite large signifying great variance inside both groups.

## **4.2.Results**

For the analyses we used linear models with interactions between factors allowing us to put gendered perceptions in a broader perspective. Consistently across all 13 presented models, we used interactions between the candidate gender variable with the country of respondent, and with the variables measuring respondents’ opinions regarding the status of women in society – i.e. the ‘Women status’ and the ‘Equality’ variable. Both the candidate gender variable and the country of respondent are both categorical variables. We therefore need to clarify that male candidate and Flanders serve as reference categories. Due to a rather small sample we report, consistently throughout the results, statistical significance of  $p < 0.1$  and lower, hence effects significant with 90% probability, although we realize the usual threshold is 95%.

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<sup>5</sup> Results of factor analysis and factor loadings used for weighted sum scores are available upon request from the authors. The two factors cumulatively explain 55% of the variance for the entire set of variables.

	Family (F)	Education (N)	Defence (M)	Justice (N)	IR (M)	Finance (N)	Health (F)	Environment (N)
<b>(Intercept)</b>	2.54 ** (1.26)	2.30 * (1.28)	4.48 *** (1.40)	3.36 *** (1.06)	3.94 *** (1.43)	2.52 (1.61)	0.13 (1.52)	0.99 (1.38)
<b>Candidate gender: Control</b>	3.01 (2.28)	-1.57 (2.15)	-2.68 (2.47)	-2.38 (1.91)	-1.44 (2.43)	-1.12 (2.74)	3.21 (2.59)	4.06 * (2.34)
<b>Candidate gender: Female</b>	-1.96 (1.81)	-1.17 (1.70)	-4.69 ** (1.95)	-0.92 (1.54)	-4.19 ** (1.92)	0.80 (2.16)	0.80 (2.04)	0.19 (1.85)
<b>Respondent SK</b>	-0.07 (0.34)	-0.37 (0.32)	-0.55 (0.37)	-0.53 * (0.29)	0.12 (0.36)	-0.11 (0.41)	-1.34 *** (0.39)	-1.21 *** (0.35)
<b>Women status</b>	0.00 (0.06)	0.06 (0.06)	-0.01 (0.06)	0.05 (0.09)	-0.09 (0.06)	0.05 (0.07)	0.17 ** (0.07)	0.12 ** (0.06)
<b>Equality</b>	0.01 (0.11)	0.00 (0.10)	-0.18 (0.11)	-0.05 (0.09)	-0.22 * (0.11)	0.12 (0.13)	0.02 (0.12)	0.04 (0.11)
<b>L-R difference</b>	-0.14 (0.09)	-0.08 (0.08)	-0.00 (0.10)	0.04 (0.07)	-0.10 (0.10)	0.05 (0.11)	0.10 (0.10)	0.18 ** (0.09)
<b>Agreement with issue statement</b>	0.48 *** (0.09)	0.48 *** (0.09)	0.43 *** (0.08)	0.45 *** (0.09)				
<b>Average agreement</b>					0.60 *** (0.16)	0.01 (0.18)	0.49 *** (0.17)	0.29 * (0.15)
<b>Candidate gender: Control *</b>	-0.12 (0.53)	-0.93 * (0.50)	0.59 (0.57)	0.29 (0.44)	-1.04 * (0.56)	-0.45 (0.63)	-0.58 (0.60)	0.19 (0.54)
<b>Respondent SK</b>	0.01 (0.49)	-0.22 (0.46)	-0.53 (0.53)	0.71 * (0.41)	-0.70 (0.53)	0.45 (0.59)	0.07 (0.56)	0.95 * (0.50)
<b>Candidate gender: Female *</b>								
<b>Respondent SK</b>	0.00 (0.10)	0.14 (0.10)	0.06 (0.11)	0.05 (0.08)	0.20 * (0.11)	0.20 (0.12)	-0.13 (0.11)	-0.10 (0.10)
<b>Candidate gender: Control * Women status</b>	0.12 (0.10)	0.11 (0.10)	0.22 ** (0.11)	-0.04 (0.09)	0.21 * (0.11)	-0.05 (0.12)	-0.06 (0.11)	-0.05 (0.10)
<b>Candidate gender: Female * Women status</b>	-0.25 (0.18)	0.08 (0.17)	0.22 (0.20)	0.18 (0.15)	0.12 (0.19)	0.02 (0.22)	-0.19 (0.21)	-0.32 (0.19)
<b>Candidate gender: Control * Equality</b>	0.12 (0.14)	0.09 (0.14)	0.33 ** (0.16)	0.06 (0.12)	0.31 ** (0.15)	-0.07 (0.17)	-0.03 (0.16)	-0.01 (0.15)
<b>Candidate gender: Female * Equality</b>								
<b>Multiple R-squared</b>	0.26	0.25	0.27	0.19	0.20	0.07	0.25	0.18
Note:	* p < 0.1 ** p < 0.05 *** p < 0.01							

**Table 3. Results of linear regression for issue competence hypotheses with estimated effects and standard errors (in parentheses). M, F, N letters included in the heading with dependent variables suggest whether the issue was hypothesized to be masculine, feminine or neutral respectively.**

The results of the eight models examining H1, related to issue competence stereotypes, are presented in Table 3. The majority of the models fit considerably well with Multiple R-squared of 0.18 and higher, with one exception (i.e. the model explaining competence in the area of finance.) Our hypotheses found support in six out of eight models, as men were perceived as significantly more competent in masculine policy issues – defence, and international relations, and we found no effect of candidate's gender in gender-neutral policy issue areas. On the contrary, women were not perceived as more competent in communal issues – health care, and family issues, despite our expectations.

Generally, what seems to be the most reliable predictor across all presented models in Table 3 is agreement with the candidate's policy opinions. This suggests that gender only plays a marginal role, and that the perception of political candidates is predominantly dependent on the political positions they represent. Interestingly, although only with 90% probability, Slovak respondents perceived female candidates to be more competent in the issues of justice, and environment – two gender neutral policy domains. Perhaps, in the area of justice this can be explained by exposure to female ministers as quite recently the Ministry was led by women – Viera Petríková served as Minister of Justice between 2009 and 2010, was replaced by Lucia Žitňanská who served until 2012, and got back to the position in 2016, although she was replaced in March 2018. The issue of environment, on the other hand, does not support such an explanation as in 25 years of independent Slovakia there has never been a female minister in this area. Finally, an interesting finding can be seen in the agentic issues of defence and international relations, where women were evaluated as more competent if respondents held a more positive stance towards gender equality.

Table 4 presents the results for hypothesis H2 related to ideological position stereotypes. This hypothesis did not find support in the data, as candidate's gender does not seem to play a role, and in addition its estimated effect is close to zero with a considerably large standard error suggesting absence of any systematic pattern. The only statistically significant variable explaining candidate's positioning on the left-right scale is respondents' self-positioning on the same scale showing that perhaps respondents' understanding of the scale really influences how they perceive political candidates. Consequently, the model does not fit well the data with Multiple R-squared of 0.06.

	<b>Estimate</b>	<b>Std. Error</b>
<b>(Intercept)</b>	3.00 *	1.55
<b>Candidate gender: Control</b>	-0.38	2.55
<b>Candidate gender: Female</b>	0.03	2.00
<b>Respondent SK</b>	0.03	0.38
<b>Women status</b>	-0.01	0.07
<b>Equality</b>	0.03	0.12
<b>Respondent on left-right scale</b>	0.18 **	0.09
<b>Average agreement</b>	0.04	0.17
<b>Candidate gender: Control * Respondent SK</b>	0.46	0.58
<b>Candidate gender: Female * Respondent SK</b>	-0.12	0.55
<b>Candidate gender: Control * Women status</b>	0.00	0.11
<b>Candidate gender: Female * Women status</b>	0.03	0.11
<b>Candidate gender: Control * Equality</b>	0.01	0.20
<b>Candidate gender: Female * Equality</b>	0.05	0.16
<b>Multiple R-squared</b>	0.06	
Note: *	p < 0.1	
**	p < 0.05	
***	p < 0.01	

**Table 4. Linear regression results for ideological positioning of the candidate**

The results of the linear models testing the hypotheses regarding leadership ability (H3) are presented in Table 5. Hypotheses expecting male candidates to be perceived as more competent to serve in leadership positions are not supported by the data causing very modest model-fits for both used dependent variables. We found no statistically significant explanation of the leadership variable calculated as a difference in the perceived candidate's competence between serving in a prime minister seat and serving as a member of the parliament. Assessment of competence to serve as a prime minister seems to be affected by respondents' average

	<b>Leadership</b>	<b>Competence to serve as PM</b>
<b>(Intercept)</b>	-0.22 (1.44)	3.36 (1.44) **
<b>Candidate gender: Control</b>	-3.60 (2.44)	-0.38 (2.45)
<b>Candidate gender: Female</b>	-0.32 (1.93)	-1.55 (1.94)
<b>Respondent SK</b>	-0.56 (0.37)	-0.49 (0.37)
<b>Women status</b>	-0.04 (0.06)	0.03 (0.07)
<b>Equality</b>	-0.06 (0.11)	-0.02 (0.11)
<b>L-R difference</b>	-0.06 (0.10)	-0.13 (0.10)
<b>Average agreement</b>	0.09 (0.16)	0.28 (0.16) *
<b>Candidate gender: Control * Respondent SK</b>	0.64 (0.56)	0.31 (0.57)
<b>Candidate gender: Female * Respondent SK</b>	0.43 (0.53)	0.44 (0.53)
<b>Candidate gender: Control * Women status</b>	0.14 (0.11)	0.07 (0.11)
<b>Candidate gender: Female * Women status</b>	0.01 (0.11)	0.01 (0.11)
<b>Candidate gender: Control * Equality</b>	0.23 (0.19)	0.01 (0.19)
<b>Candidate gender: Female * Equality</b>	-0.01 (0.15)	0.12 (0.16)
<b>Multiple R-squared</b>	0.05	0.09
Note: *	p < 0.1	
**	p < 0.05	
***	p < 0.01	

**Table 5. Linear regression results for leadership ability hypotheses with estimated effects and standard errors (in parentheses)**

agreement with the presented text messages once again suggesting that the evaluation of candidates is more dependent on their political positions rather than their gender.

Finally, Table 6 presents the results of the linear models explaining respondents' perceptions of a candidate's general competence to function in politics (H4). Once again, we found no support in the data for our hypothesis, as candidate's gender is not a statistically significant factor in neither of two models. The data fit the models fairly well with Multiple R-squared of 0.15 and 0.16 with only average agreement with the candidate's text messages on policy issues as a significant predictor of their overall competence.

	Competence in politics (general)	Competence (average)
<b>(Intercept)</b>	3.11 (0.97) ***	3.35 (0.91) ***
<b>Candidate gender: Control</b>	0.01 (1.65)	0.95 (1.55)
<b>Candidate gender: Female</b>	-0.12 (1.30)	-1.19 (1.22)
<b>Respondent SK</b>	-0.12 (0.25)	-0.18 (0.23)
<b>Women status</b>	0.05 (0.04)	0.05 (0.04)
<b>Equality</b>	0.06 (0.08)	0.02 (0.07)
<b>L-R difference</b>	-0.06 (0.06)	-0.09 (0.06)
<b>Average agreement</b>	0.32 (0.11) ***	0.26 (0.10) **
<b>Candidate gender: Control * Respondent SK</b>	-0.01 (0.38)	-0.01 (0.36)
<b>Candidate gender: Female * Respondent SK</b>	0.01 (0.36)	0.15 (0.33)
<b>Candidate gender: Control * Women status</b>	0.00 (0.07)	0.00 (0.07)
<b>Candidate gender: Female * Women status</b>	0.04 (0.07)	0.02 (0.07)
<b>Candidate gender: Control * Equality</b>	0.00 (0.13)	-0.07 (0.12)
<b>Candidate gender: Female * Equality</b>	0.05 (0.10)	0.10 (0.10)
<b>Multiple R-squared</b>	0.15	0.16
Note: * p < 0.1		
** p < 0.05		
*** p < 0.01		

**Table 6. Linear regression results for general competence hypotheses with estimated effects and standard errors (in parentheses)**

All in all, the presented models show reasonably consistent support only for the hypotheses related to issue competence stereotypes, however they seem to work only in one direction – in favour of male candidates in male-dominated policy domains, but do not seem to cause any preference for women in communal policy areas. Similarly, throughout our analyses, we did not find any evidence to support embeddedness of political gender stereotypes in different cultural and political contexts of Flanders and Slovakia. We therefore have to reject hypothesis H5a as well.

## **5. Discussion and conclusion**

The purpose of this paper was to uncover the prevalence of political gender stereotypes in Flanders and Slovakia and to examine whether political gender stereotypes are conditioned by the political and cultural context. Political gender stereotypes were operationalized as the different perception of the (issue) competences and the ideological positions of male and female candidates. We also focused on voters' perceptions of the leadership abilities of male and female candidates.

Surprisingly, our results, based on a comparative experimental design, rather point to the absence of political gender stereotypes. Both in Flanders and Slovakia, the level of perceived competence to function in politics in general is more or less similar for male and female candidates. Also when it comes to perceived leadership abilities, our sample generally does not make a distinction between male and female candidates. The idea that there is a glass ceiling, preventing women from being considered as competent for high-level leadership functions, does not seem to hold. Likewise, in terms of perceived ideological positions, respondents do not differentiate between male and female candidates. This perception is rather influenced by the respondents' own ideological positioning. This may come as no surprise since Conover and Feldman (1989) suggest a tendency for individuals to assume that others hold similar views to their own. Consequently, voters' placement of candidates on an ideological scale may reflect their own ideological orientation (Koch, 2000).

When it comes to issue competence stereotypes, we did find some support for the idea that men are perceived as significantly more competent in agentic policy issues, such as defense and international relations. On the other hand, women were not perceived as more competent in communal issues, e.g. health care and family issues. This seems to indicate that issue competence stereotypes only work in one direction: in favor of men in male-dominated policy areas. Consequently, female candidates may have a difficult time when defense or security issues are at the top of the agenda. It also needs to be noted that respondents' perception of women's competence on these issues is strongly conditioned by their opinion on women's status and gender equality. This would suggest that, if societies were more liberal, women would have it easier to be perceived as competent – not necessarily equal to men – on these issues.

Furthermore, our results generally did not reveal any differences between Flemish and Slovak respondents. Although Slovak respondents were slightly more conservative in terms of the appropriate role for women in society and gender equality-issues, this did not translate into a stronger presence of political gender stereotypes among Slovak respondents. Consequently, we did not find any evidence to support the idea that political gender stereotypes are conditioned by the political context and culture. This might be an indication that the political representation of women is more dependent on the rules of political battle than on voters' perceptions and biases. For example, the observed differences in women's level of representation may to some extent be caused by the existence of gender quotas, which are absent in Slovakia, or be a consequence of male-dominated political parties.

The absence of political gender stereotypes in both settings is puzzling. However, it needs to be noted that there might be an effect from some specific elements of our methodological design. First, this might be related to the sample used for this experiment. We relied on a sample of university students, which acted as a least-likely case to test our hypotheses. Students, because they are the youngest voters, are more likely to have been exposed to women in (prominent) positions in government and parliament. This might result in the fact that they are more liberal in their attitudes towards female candidates and that they have a lower probability of holding political gender stereotypes. Although the present study generally points to the absence of political gender stereotypes, this does not necessarily mean that this holds for other samples as well. It would therefore be interesting to supplement this study with a study conducted among a sample of the general population in both Flanders and Slovakia. This would enhance our understanding of which individual-level factors can help explain the prevalence of political gender stereotypes.

Second, the results of our linear regression analyses point out that respondents' perceptions of political candidates are first and foremost influenced by the extent to which respondents agree with the content of the policy position and the nature of the issues at stake. Also, the distance between the presented candidate's perceived ideological distance and the ideological self-positioning of the respondents seem to have an impact. This seems to indicate that gender only plays a marginal role and that voters' perceptions of candidates' competence is rather evidence-based (i.e. related to the direction and the content of the policy that they pursue) than stereotype-based. This actually presents a positive outlook for female candidates since it reduces the chances of a voter bias. This also relates to the idea that heuristic cues, such as candidate gender,

are most important in low-information contexts (McDermott, 1997). In the presence of other information, such as the policy positions included in our design, voters are less likely to rely on gender cues in order to form impressions of candidates. Consequently, (female) candidates are more likely to be evaluated on the basis of what they do, and not of who they are. We therefore conclude that other factors can outweigh the cue of candidate gender.

The latter also relates to the arguments put forward by Bauer (2015). She argues that stereotypes require activation before voters use them to evaluate female candidates. This depends on the type of information voters have about a candidate. In our experiment, we only provided very neutral and basic information. This might differ from real-world situations, in which voters receive different kinds of information about political candidates since they are frequently covered in the news and the media. Political candidates also communicate themselves and send out important signals to voters in that way. It could therefore be that political gender stereotypes are not inherently present, but must be triggered or activated by the media or by the way the political candidates portrays themselves. We believe that this would be a fruitful area for future research.

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## Appendix

### Example of the presented profiles



Candidate X is **46** years old and holds a degree in **Law**. He studied Economics in his hometown before undertaking law studies at Ghent University. As a student, candidate X was very active in different **associations**. This **social commitment** also fueled his interest in politics. In his spare time, candidate X enjoys **tennis**, **music** and good **food**. He is **married** and has two **children**.

These are candidate X's views on **defense**: "The **power relations** in the world have **changed** dramatically over the last decades and are still shifting. International terrorism, cyber-attacks, conflicts and failing states have a considerable impact on the security of our country and Europe. The protection of our citizens benefits from **peace and stability** in our neighboring regions and worldwide. I propose a security policy which provides us with necessary resources to secure the lives of our citizens by investing in **modernization** of our forces and **international cooperation**."

These are candidate X's views on **education**: "Every student should have the opportunity to get the **best** out of him or herself and be prepared for a high-quality job. Consequently, we need to ensure a **high-quality and modern educational environment** which requires continuous **investments** in our schools. Additionally, the quality of our education largely depends on the quality of our **teachers**. It is therefore of the utmost importance that a reform of the teacher education is carried out and that the **teacher career** is made more attractive."

These are candidate X's views on **justice**: "It is vital that **trust** in the rule of law is secured. A vigorous and reliable justice system needs to be one of the **cornerstones** of our society. Our justice system should be an example of a well-organized, transparent and efficient public service. It should bring together **professionalism** and **integrity** so disputes between parties, or guilt or innocence are decided by trustworthy people. Justice should be **accessible** to everyone, all citizens should be treated equally before law, and no one should stand above the law, regardless of status or resources."

These are candidate X's views on **child care**: "The state needs to create such environment that would **motivate** young people to start their families in decent and sustainable living conditions. Child care is a **basic provision** for families and has not only an educational, but also an economic and social function. It is my goal to provide all families with **high-quality** and **affordable** child care services within a reasonable time period and at a reasonable distance from their home."

#### Female condition



Candidate X is **46** years old and holds a degree in **Law**. She studied Economics in her hometown before undertaking law studies at Ghent University. As a student, candidate X was very active in different associations. This social commitment also fueled her interest in politics. In her spare time, candidate X enjoys **tennis**, **music** and good **food**. She is **married** and has two **children**.

#### Control condition

Person X is **46** years old and holds a degree in **Law**. Person X studied Economics before undertaking law studies at Ghent University. As a student, person X was very active in different associations. This social commitment also fueled person X's interest in politics. Person X also enjoys **tennis**, **music** and good **food**. Person X is **married** and has two **children**.